



ARSENAL FIRES STILL UNDER SCRUTINY

By Amy Riggin/OF THE COMMERCIAL STAFF

An investigation of two fires at the Pine Bluff Chemical Agent Facility is ongoing, the Pine Bluff Arsenal Citizen's Advisory Commission was told Tuesday.

The fires occurred in the explosion containment room on May 11 and May 22 while processing drained, sarin-filled M55 rockets. There has not yet been a determination of the cause of the fires, officials said.

Derick Warrick, with the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality's hazardous waste division, said the department is continuing an investigation of the fires.

"There was never any danger to human health or the environment," Warrick said.

The department's enforcement division is also looking into the two incidents, Warrick said, and will determine whether the Arsenal violated its operational permit in procedures before, during or after the fires.

Washington Group International, the contractor hired to incinerate the weapons, also is investigating along with the Army's Chemical Materials Agency, according to Bob Love.

Love, project general manager for operations at Anniston, Ala., had been acting project general manager here since operations began in March. His replacement was announced Tuesday.

Warrick described the incidents as "exothermic reactions to a propellant" in the rockets. He said the propellant eventually "burned itself out."

Propellants are the materials used to propel a rocket. Warrick said they contain cellulose and nitroglycerin.

Both incidents involved the same rocket sheer machine, which cuts the rockets into eight pieces before they are incinerated in a deactivation furnace. Both rockets ignited in the bottom of a "feed bin hopper" after being cut, he said.

Randy Long, site project manager for the facility, said the May 11 fire lasted about two minutes and the May 22 fire lasted 22 seconds.

After the first fire, crews made modifications to the process and resumed operations on May 13. After the second, operations resumed eight hours later after more modifications. Long said one change made to the process is that sprays that cool the blades as they cut the rockets are used for longer intervals -- five instead of two seconds -- during the last three cuts.

Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility in Oregon reported similar fires while processing rockets April 7, April 23 and May 18.

Five fires in such a short period of time, Long said, has caused the Army to reevaluate the nature of the stockpile and how the disposal process might need to be altered.

Long said adjustments that have already been made should help to prevent more fires and an in-depth study will determine if more are needed.

He added that, because the rockets are 45- to 60-years-old, there may be similar fires throughout the process.

In response to a question from Commissioner Wesley Stites, Long said that out of 165,000 rockets processed in the U.S. to date, there have been fewer than 10 fires of this type.

Love also said the company had hired 662 employees but needs a total of 777. He hoped to fill positions at upcoming job fairs.

In other news, the Arsenal also announced that small quantities of diluted blister agent and nerve agent solutions were delivered to the Pine Bluff Chemical Activity laboratory Tuesday by the U.S. Army 22nd Chemical Battalion.

The solutions -- totaling less than half a cup -- were shipped from Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., to Grider Field and then taken to the Arsenal. They will be used for research development, testing and evaluation purposes.

Joe Daven, field office manager for the Non-Stockpile Chemical Materiel Project, said the solutions will be used to support sampling and monitoring operations for Ton Container Decontamination and the Rapid Response System projects underway at the Arsenal.

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